

## THE U.N. AT FIFTY: NO KEY TO PEACE

President Bill Clinton will be in San Francisco on June 26 to participate in the 50th anniversary celebration of the signing of the United Nations Charter. It was in June of 1945 that war-weary America took the lead in founding the U.N., harboring high hopes that it would become a major force in advancing world peace. But the U.N. has failed to live up to these expectations. After 50 years it has become clear that the U.N. is only a marginal player in establishing international peace.

President Clinton apparently believes otherwise. In his recent New Hampshire discussion with House Speaker Newt Gingrich, President Clinton suggested that the U.N. had been instrumental in keeping the peace during the Cold War. The President soon after corrected himself by noting "that the United Nations didn't keep all the peace in the last 50 years."

While in San Francisco the President should be careful not to exaggerate the U.N.'s importance. The U.N. has been, and will continue to be, of only marginal relevance to international peace and security. Suggesting otherwise only sets the stage for future policy debacles involving the U.S. military. The President also should resist committing U.S. support to anything other than traditional U.N. peacekeeping operations, such as in Cyprus, where peacekeepers act as buffers between parties who have ceased hostilities.

**Flawed Premise.** U.N. peacekeeping turns disastrous when it takes the form of "peacemaking." Many factors have contributed to U.N. peacekeeping failures in Somalia, Bosnia, and elsewhere, including poor U.N. organization and inevitable disagreements over objectives among nations contributing troops. These shortcomings have led many to suggest such reforms as upgrading U.N. peacekeeping facilities in New York and establishing a standing U.N. army. The problem with peacemaking, however, is more fundamental.

When trying to deter one or more combatants from achieving their goals through the force of arms, the essence of "peacemaking," U.N. forces quickly become just another group of combatants. In Bosnia, for example, U.N. peacekeepers essentially are warring with the Bosnian Serbs. U.N. forces playing this role are unlikely to succeed in coercing combatants into peace. The constrained mandates which the U.N. typically issues, moreover, do not allow for the complete destruction of the military capabilities of combatants, which often is a prerequisite to political settlements.

More important, the countries providing peacekeepers have considerably less interest in the conflicts than do the forces their troops are fighting. As casualties are incurred, pressure mounts to bring the troops home. The Bosnian Serbs understand this very well. The result is often a half-hearted and ultimately futile operation that suffers casualties in vain, as the U.S. did in Somalia.

When major states, particularly the U.S., are unwilling to suffer casualties in conflicts of little direct interest to them, they often are derided for a lack of "leadership." Many critics of Washington's policy on Bosnia have suggested that the U.S. is shirking its international responsibility as a leader by shying away from the inevitable casualties that would result from forcefully intervening in that centuries-old conflict. Some commentators even have suggested that the U.S. hesitancy to intervene in Bosnia and elsewhere, including Somalia before President Bush committed troops there, is immoral. The "immoral" policy, however, is to suffer casualties in a conflict with no bearing to American national security and soon after to abandon the U.S. commitment, as was done in Somalia.

Calculations of the national interest undermine the notion of global collective security upon which the entire U.N. approach to security is based. The fact is that nations never have, nor will they ever, consider a threat to peace anywhere as a threat to peace everywhere. Members of the League of Nations were unwilling to defend Ethiopia against Italian aggression in 1935; the Europeans and Americans are unwilling to mount a vigorous defense of Bosnia today.

**U.N. Way or No Way?** Recognizing global collective security as a myth is not tantamount to saying that no collective action is possible or even necessary. Collective action on a regional basis, such as in NATO and during the Persian Gulf War, whether or not it is sanctioned by the U.N., undoubtedly is the best way to maintain international peace and stability.

It is a red herring to suggest, as the Clinton Administration does, that without the U.N. the U.S. will be forced "to act alone or not at all." This represents an odd reading of history. The U.S. has acted in concert with allies in most of its international conflicts. NATO, perhaps the most successful security pact in history, is a multilateral, not international, organization. The real fear of many who raise the "all or nothing" canard is not for American security, but for the prestige of the U.N., which suffers considerably without active American participation.

**The Next 50 Years.** Some analysts and politicians argue that the U.S. should use the U.N. only to serve its interests. The archetype is President Bush's securing U.N. approval for the Persian Gulf War. Proponents of this *modus operandi* must recognize, however, that using the U.N. in this way establishes a precedent for future U.S. action. As a result, bypassing the Security Council has become more politically difficult.

This trend is particularly troubling because U.S. influence within the Security Council is likely to diminish. The Security Council may be expanded beyond its current five permanent and ten rotating members. Brazil, India, Nigeria, Japan, and Germany have been discussed as possible members to possess veto power. The Clinton Administration has expressed support for granting permanent Security Council seats to developing countries. Any Security Council expansion, of course, will diminish U.S. influence, making the achievement of approval for U.S. actions to defend its national interest more difficult, particularly as many of the states represented in the U.N. today share none of the values enshrined in the U.N. Charter.

It is wrong to blame the U.N. for foolish American policies. The U.N. cannot force America to act against its security interests. It did not drive President Bush to send U.S. troops to Somalia or order Washington's European allies into their Bosnia quagmire. U.N. influence is more subtle. It is exercised mainly through U.S. policy-makers who want either to hide behind the U.N. to avoid action or, conversely, to use it to drag the U.S. into conflicts which it should otherwise avoid.

While in San Francisco, the President should remember an unassailable fact about international politics: The U.N. does not transcend "mere" national interests. Rhetoric which belittles the American national interest, however indirectly, only encourages debacles like Somalia. The loss of 30 lives in that failed U.N. operation is a high price to pay for an empty dream.

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